Embracing the Otherness of Others: An Approach for Teacher Educators to Assuage Social and Political Tribalism

Sonja Varbelow, PhD

Angelo State University

Sonja.varbelow@angelo.edu (email can be published)

ASU Station #10893

San Angelo, TX 76909-0893

Phone: 325.486.6946

Embracing the Otherness of Others:

An Approach for Teacher Educators to Assuage Social and Political Tribalism

Abstract

We live in a corrosively polarized climate where sharply divided beliefs about globalization and populism magnify existing biases. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that those who want to educate the next generation – teacher candidates – have been schooled in systems that focus on obedience, conformity, and docility. This breadcrumbs approach to education bears the danger of reproducing the status quo rather than changing it. This chapter explores the promises, perils, and provocations of curriculum regarding how we think about diversity and delineates a learning experience for pre-service teachers that allows them to identify, approach, and become the Other. The lived experience illuminates the cultural and experiential origins of their beliefs while reconciling the uncomfortable notion that bias is part of the human condition. In times where sharpened divisions intensify social and political tribalism it is essential to understand that it is the way one acts upon one's biases that determines what kind of world one creates.

Key words: curriculum theory, bias, diversity, lived experiences, teacher education

Embracing the Otherness of Others: An Approach for Teacher Educators to Assuage Social and Political Tribalism

Introduction

We live in a corrosive political and social climate, which is characterized by divisiveness and tribalism. Although this seems like a phenomenon birthed during the last presidential election campaign, the need of humans to understand the self in terms of which clans one belongs to is nothing new. What seems new is the way people as individuals and as a society act upon their social identity. To understand what causes this seemingly intense segregation at times when humanity is more globalized than ever before, I will explore origins for bias and show a learning experience offered to aspiring educators whose goal it is to bridge differences and understand them as essential necessities for one's individual evolution.

This chapter consists of three parts: Part I *Tribalism in Modern Times and the Promises of Diversity* offers explanations for personal and societal bias from psychology, anthropology, and educational philosophy. Part II *The Mission for Education Systems and the Perils of Diversity* explores the purpose of higher education amidst the divisive climate we live in. Finally, Part III *Seeking the Other and the Provocations of Diversity* delineates an approach to offer aspiring teachers the opportunity to first identify, then approach, and eventually become the Other. The chapter concludes with thoughts about the promises, perils, and provocation of diversity in the global divide that is our present.

Part I - Tribalism in Modern Times and the Promises of Diversity

Whatever the one generation may learn from the other, that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no different task from that of every previous generation, nor does it get further …

Kierkegaard, 1954, p. 130

October 2017. I am on my way to a conference on ecology in education, which focuses on the interconnectedness and relationships among all parts of our natural and social ecosystem. As we are waiting to deplane, the lady behind me feels compelled to comment sadly and loudly on how divided the country is. She ends her dismal description of present times by wishing we would come together as a nation and focus on being American. "Can't we all just get along?" I am relieved she is addressing everyone willing to listen instead of me personally because I am too travel-weary to explain why thinking of oneself as an American is the same kind of tribalism as is thinking of oneself as a liberal or a conservative. Her conclusion might have resonated particularly strongly with me because I am not a U.S. citizen. I am German and an immigrant, which complexifies a conversation on national tribalism exponentially. But her pulse check of the present political and social climate in the U.S. is an accurate observation that extends far beyond the well-protected borders of this country. In Germany, Angela Merkel won the 2017 elections while the far-right AfD[1] Party experienced a spectacular victory coming in third. Earlier this year in France, far-right Mari Le Pen conceded to Macron with a notable third of all votes. Similar populist trends in other European countries such as The Netherlands and Austria make the U.S.'s current political climate no fringe phenomenon.

What seems puzzling, though, is why this divisiveness feels so acute today when it has always existed, which is not to say that its lack of novelty devalues the importance of the phenomenon. I grew up in East Berlin during the Cold War amidst daily news of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which reflects just two examples for tribalism from recent history. One reason for why we experience today's divisiveness so keenly is that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989,

[1] AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)

which ended the Cold War, and the immediately following technological revolution of the 1990s gave rise to the feeling of a global village. International disarmament, glasnost and perestroika, and the Internet brought us closer together. Germans were reunited with their brothers and sisters of the free world while America rejoiced from afar. We had a global kumbaya moment of sorts. As the ideologically divisive Iron Curtain came down, the Internet became a gateway to corners of the world previously out of reach. Now geographical distance did not equal social distance anymore. Today we are connected with each other for the big ideas through professional Facebook pages or LinkedIn, and for the mundane aspects of every day life – I regularly FaceTime with my mother in Berlin and keep connected with my Indian friends through WhatsApp. However, the way in which we connect potentially diminishes our worlds more than it enlarges them. While we include some into our global communities, we exclude others, specifically those whose fundamental beliefs differ from ours. We "unfriend" a Facebook connection for a political comment that we disagree with because it makes us feel uncomfortable. As a result, we create filter bubbles that quickly become echo chambers for our metaphorical boxes, which are defined by our biases. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that a stunning 62% of Americans get their news through social media instead of from journalist websites or TV news channels (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). Political divisions extend to social relationships. We surround ourselves with like-minded people to the point where acknowledging the Other becomes a form of treason (Haidt, 2016).

So the Internet, which has come to us at just the right moment in history, turned out to be one of the greatest ironies of modern times (Bruni, 2014). The advantage came with the pitfall: while allowing us to make stronger connections with those whose worldviews harmonize with ours, we use it to segregate ourselves from those who could deepen our thinking by offering

different views. This happens because we choose our communities based on pre-exiting beliefs. Lukianoff (2017) poignantly notes "technological advancement has only increased our ability to achieve twenty-four hour confirmation," (p. 2). Our desire to interact with those who make us feel good about ourselves confirms our biases, and we think of the Other as an adversary who presents a threat to our worldview rather than as a fellow human being with whom we disagree.

Why We Succumb to Tribalism

We are prone to tribalism. An anthropologist would argue that this is the case because we are a social species. Individuals with social tendencies have probably survived, reproduced, and passed on those social traits better than individuals with extreme anti-social behavior. And since humans evolved in small groups, presumably competing with other small groups, any dispositions that enhance social solidarity might have presented an advantage (Yaworsky, personal communication, October 12, 2017). A psychologist might reason that tribalism is directly connected to our innate confirmation bias, which is the notion that we instinctively highlight evidence that undergirds our beliefs. Cognitive processes function in ways that inevitably lead to a confirmation of one's hypotheses (Kunda, 1990). In other words, we find what we are looking for because it fits seamlessly and effortlessly into the narrative of the world we have created for ourselves up until this point. For example, if you identify as a Democrat, every move and tweet by sitting President Trump is interpreted as a travesty and serves as proof that you were right not to vote for him. Equally, if you did vote for him, he can do no wrong.

Either consciously or subconsciously, we avoid asking the correct questions about those views that make our own seem like they do not fit into the bigger picture of the world that we have created for ourselves. Interestingly, presenting someone with facts with the goal to prove them wrong has the opposite effect. In a study with Palestinian and Israeli participants, Ginges,

Atran, Medin, and Shikaki (2007) showed that the only way to overcome violent opposition to compromise is that the adversary shows willingness to compromise on what is considered his sacred values. Ginges et al. (2007) hypothesize that this is the case because such a compromise presents an equitable loss for both sides. However, it is also possible that giving up on one's sacred values signals an openness to the Other that cautiously alleviates deeply seated distrust and creates the chance for compassion to be born.

Self-Understanding and the Need to Belong

People often think of themselves in dichotomous terms such as self/Other, which reduces the self to an ego that is reminiscent of Cartesian dualism (Aoki, 1993). Its focus is on how the self is inferior or superior to the Other. This results in a comparison of myself with those I[2] interact with and in reflections of how they might perceive me, which then influence how I think of myself. This understanding limits the self to the extent to which I could be more me if Other didn't tell me what *I am not*, or be the real me if Other didn't tell me what *I am*. Similarly, it is also not useful to think of self/Other intersubjectively, as a "we," because this inflates the self as a synergy of self and Other. Both views understand the self/Other dichotomy in terms of degree, which does not offer a deeper understanding of self. They sharpen divisions and exacerbate tribalism in ways that are isolating and hinder one's individual evolution.

Huebner (1963) observed that relationships are the sine qua non of human existence. The problem then is not relating to others but to do so in ways that overcome isolation. He noted that we wander through life essentially "alone … with other human beings" (p. 75), and that the purpose of all the relations we seek is to reconcile this existential aloneness. Even the non-

[2] The use of the pronouns *I* and *he* is to mean "of humankind." When I used more inclusive pronouns like *s/he* and gender-neutral *they,* the complex idea of self/Other was verbally complicated without being conceptually complexified.

existentialist reader might agree that we never really know an Other. I am a daughter and a mother of two adult children. I feel confident in my assumption that there is no other person in the world who knows my mother and my children better than I do while being wholly convinced that I do not nor ever will really know them.

Huebner goes on to describe four basic forms of social encounters: The first kind is that in which I attempt to escape my aloneness by joining a crowd. As I become part of a collective, my solitude is not brought to consciousness any longer. At the same time, my individuality is lost because the collective does not provide opportunity for me to establish my identity. As a result, I give up my freedom while my problem of overcoming my aloneness is not resolved. Next are those encounters that are characterized by failure to acknowledge the Other. This is done through categorizing and stereotyping, which denies the Other his individuality and renders him an insignificant Other. At its worst, this encounter demonizes the Other. In the third kind, I do recognize my aloneness and attempt to overcome it by making myself subservient to an Other. To be accepted, I forfeit my freedom and my individuality. As a result, I am still alone, as is the dominant partner of the relationship. Since the latter can never trust the former, both are closed off from each other.

Huebner concludes that only the fourth kind of social encounter bears the possibility for man to reconcile his solitude. For this to happen, we must both first acknowledge that each of us is alone. In other words, we do not make assumptions about each other or about how we each are perceived by the other. We then engage in conversation. Huebner differentiates between communication and conversation. The former only serves to gain information. True conversation, on the other hand, presupposes an openness to the Other that allows each to be influenced. Huebner explained,

> He who is free to converse with others retains an element of childlike curiosity about others; a curiosity based not on a desire to verify one's normalcy and worth, but on the acceptance of and awe for the complexity and mystery of human life. … Furthermore, conversation demands an acceptance and acknowledgement of the reality and value of the other person; not only of his equality but of his fraternity and solitude. (p. 78)

True conversation changes three things: me, the Other, and our relationship with each other. This is made possible when the Other sincerely knows that I am open to be influenced by him; my openness stems from me acknowledging him as a fellow human being in whom I am genuinely interested.

To this point, Aoki (1993) suggests to "embrace the otherness of others" (p. 213), which means to understand that Other illuminates different and new aspects of my self[3] and makes obvious that I am this self very much because of Other, that is because of what Other makes me understand about my self. If I embrace this understanding, I can I understand my self more deeply than before. In other words, Aoki points to the need to understand that I depend on the Otherness of Others. However, acknowledging this need is characterized by tension because it challenges what I have understood up until this moment. So the first step is to accept that my understanding is always temporary and destined to change with my very next encounter. This change might not undo my previously written narrative of the world, which reflects my singular reality, but it illuminates it in a different light and so makes it visible more clearly. What I can now see is a distortion, a lack of coherence, for which I have to make adjustments. My narrative resembles my epistemology, my personal way of knowing the world. When people meet, their

[3] The spelling of "my" and "self" as two separate words signals intention rather than an inherent quality as is the case when spelled as one word.

epistemologies meet. The disquietude that this meeting causes and the resulting sudden incoherence in my narrative make it possible for me to question what I have known so far. This is often a difficult process because I do not easily give up on the transitional meanings I have chosen to weave the whole story together. But if I do not resist the breaking up of connections between my individual narratives, I have the chance to know better. Aoki (1981) explained, "the meaningfulness of one understanding comes into view illuminated by the whole context; and the meaningful of the whole comes into view illuminated by a part" (p. 228). In this way, disquietude causes me to transform my narrative and so resembles a chance to transform my self.

The point is to think of contradictions between self and Other as a mode of human relationships whose provocative nature is pearl-producing. But the dialectic between needing an Other to understand how the self connects to humanity and using the Other to isolate the self, presents a conundrum. The problem is not the fact that, anthropologically, psychologically, or existentially, we are condemned to needing to belong; the problem is that we segregate ourselves into warring clans. Niels Bohr said that profound truths are characterized by the fact that their opposites are also profound truths, in contrast to trivialities whose opposites are absurd (Rozental, 1967). With the technological revolution, we have created possibilities ad infinitum for ourselves to explore those opposing truths. Instead, however, we have allowed for tribalism in modern times to reduce the quality of human relationships ad absurdum. Historically, every generation has done that in its own way. If we have learned nothing from those who came before us, it might be because this is part of the "genuinely human" Kierkegaard referred to in the introductory quote that each generation has to learn anew, which means there is hope.

Part II - The Mission for Education Systems and the Perils of Diversity

The problem faced by teachers is how to teach in such a fashion that children become freer by using knowledge, rather than embedded in new cultural chains.

Huebner, 1962/1999, p. 39

August 2010. I am standing in front of my *Intro to Teaching* students, a freshman level course. They look at me, wholly absorbed in what I say, taking everything for gospel. These are potentially my future colleagues, and it is troubling that they take everything I say as truths to be lived by instead of questioning it. I tell them about Bertolucci's movie *The Conformist*, which tells the story of an "enlightened" professor who was eventually assassinated by the student he mentored (Carlson, 2002). The movie is set in the times of Mussolini's fascism. The professor expatriated to France where he worked with the Resistance. The student, Clerici, lost without his academic father, turned to the next best authority to tell him what is good and right and valuable and became an obedient fascist who completed his mission to murder his former mentor. It takes all of the semester, every semester, for my students to come to terms with the idea that the professor just replaced one truth with another - his. It takes much longer to grasp the idea that education is that which enables a person to question long-held beliefs and design ways to live under one's own supervision (Kierkegaard, 1954).

Current pre-service teachers were schooled in a system where learning lacks transfer (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Its hierarchically implemented curriculum is estranged from students' and teachers' lives and designed to further competitive ethics (Kincheloe, 2008). We learn mainly from experience, and my students' experiential knowledge about school comes from them being students. The trouble is that in schools, we raise excellent sheep (Deresiewicz, 2014) because we train, rather than educate, for obedience, docility, and conformity. We employ

a breadcrumbs approach that guides students to where we think they should go. But these are my future colleagues, and if we always do what we always did, we'll always get what we always got. And even if that had been spectacular, it would make progress all but impossible.

If kindergarten-12th grade education keeps people in their Platonic caves, the mission for institutions of higher education must be to get people out of their comfort zones to explore territories beyond their metaphorical box. But as soon as students arrive at college, they start to "network" with the goal of establishing connections with what is familiar and comforting to them. Because college, unlike high school, is not based on neighborhood zoning, it offers a more diversified environment. Yet instead of diversifying friends to seek new and different perspectives, they collapse this new environment into one that resembles their past comfort zones (Bruni, 2014).

Lukianoff (2017) observed that college students in most institutions of higher education seem to follow four simple rules: talk with peers who think like you, join organizations that confirm your beliefs, figure out what the professor wants and don't disagree, stay away from controversial topics. By not counter-acting these approaches to higher learning, colleges close the door on students' temporary openness, which is borne out of the curiosity of a newcomer, in hopes that keeping them comfortable leads to greater retention rates and therefore better revenue for the enterprise Ed Inc. To this point, Haidt (2016) deplores the continued "coddling" of students, which began with parenting trends in the 1980s. For example, students are given trigger warnings prior to reading assignments if the content is potentially opposed to their existing views and therefore disturbing. There seems to be the assumption that students are too fragile to think through a concept that might cause even the remotest disquietude. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) warn that this tendency results in protecting the dominant group, which at the

moment are liberals, by treating conservatives as a morally defect Other. This Othering is expressed in microagressions, which are intentional or unintentional explicit or subtly hostile, derogatory, or other negative behaviors. Since "outsiders," who are those who feel Othered when it is assumed that everybody in the room has the same underlying worldviews, feel intimidated to voice their oppositions to opinions held by the dominant group, there is the danger that the concepts of the dominant group are not challenged in ways that necessitate deep and critical thinking.

The elimination of conflict does not only *not* challenge college students' existing beliefs, but it validates them, which reinforces the metaphorical box in which they house their singular version of reality. If concepts are not challenged, the process of truth seeking does not function. The result is a homogeneity of thought, which is counterproductive to truth-seeking. It is the antithesis to Karl Popper's theory of falsification. Popper, a 20th century social scientist, proposed that since a social theory can hardly be proven beyond a doubt, we must expose it to relentless criticism, trying to falsify it (Popper, 1972). Only if our attempts to disprove a hypothesis fail, can we think of it as truthful enough to use it as a premises for further thinking. Popper's idea was that truth is something we must strive for while reconciling the idea that it is unattainable. As long as we demonize the Other, our support for a democracy is waning because we enforce the kind of bigotry that potentially cripples the very idea of a democratic society, namely the protection of non-dominant groups.

So instead of helping college students understand that they play an infinitesimal yet integral part in a pluralistic society, they learn to think of those whose worldviews clash with their own as an Other who is misguided and stubborn (Lukianoff, 2017). What they must learn instead is that an educated person is one who seeks out opposing views because to converse

about them is the only way to illuminate one's own views, and this brief but intense flash of bright lightning will unequivocally lead to a better understanding of the self and the part one plays in the bigger picture of the photomosaic that is the synthesis of humanity.

Huebner (1962), in the above quote, decrees that education must make us freer. For him, learning is the journey of the self (Huebner, 1993). This process begins with students owning their learning rather than holding me responsible for making them knowledgeable or successful teachers. The goal must be for students to become aware of themselves, their beliefs about the world they exist in, and where those beliefs emanated. With this awareness, they must be challenged to design their individual, ever-temporary definitions for the purpose of school and what it means to be an educated person. Only then is there hope that they choose their place in the world rather than be placed in it and that they extend this ability and responsibility to their own students. This notion becomes particularly relevant for pre-service teachers who are about to enter an education system that is eternally situated in the limbo between politics and policies on one hand and scholarly voices on the other. The current test-driven, economic nature of the institution school readily reduces the role of the teacher to that of a tamer when, in fact, s/he should unleash the lion.

I tell my *Intro to Teaching* students about Nietzsche's (1978) metamorphoses - from the camel that acquires human knowledge, to the lion who critiques it, and finally, to the child who dreams up possibilities for himself of how to exist in the world and how to contribute meaningfully to the communities he is part of. The professor in Bertolucci's movie never enabled Clerici to go through the second metamorphosis. The goal of higher education must be to incite it.

Part III – Seeking the Other and the Provocations of Diversity

We are all bigots. All of us prejudge people on some basis, be it race, sex, sexual preference, height, age, or any of scores of categories …

Crutcher, 1991, p. 131

March 2006. I am preparing a unit plan for my 10th grade English class on Chris Crutcher's book *Athletic Shorts*, which is a collection of short stories whose themes promised to resonate well with high school students. As I am starting to read the last one, I stumble over the above quote: "We're all bigots …," and I think he's got that one wrong. I certainly am no bigot. I am a high school English teacher in a challenging urban neighborhood and the embodiment of Miss Open-Minded. But because this author was able to engage my students in ways other adolescent authors couldn't, as I knew from previous reads, I was willing to entertain his insult for a brief (and unexpectedly shocking) moment. After some soul-searching, I found that I was biased against people who were obese and against those whom I perceived to lack basic intelligence. I was as shocked then as I am ashamed today remembering this previous me. But shame is somewhat counter-productive when coming to terms with one's biases. Prejudice, which gives rise to bias, is part of the human condition. The point here is to become aware of our biases and their origins so that we can consciously choose how to act upon them instead of reacting emotionally. By diagnosing our ills, we have a chance to counter-act them (Jacobs, 2017). This is a difficult process that requires a certain amount of objectivity to avoid becoming defensive, which would continuously close us off from the Other.

Our biases are mainly rooted in three phenomena – in the beliefs taught to us by those we trusted when we grew up, in our prior experiences, and in the lack of experience with a phenomenon. In my case, it was the second. Much of my childhood was characterized by being

excluded because I was too heavy. Once I was able to lose weight, I falsely assumed that everybody had the same goal and that if I could do it, so could anyone else. My second bias originated from a three minute experience on the last day of 9th grade during which my math teacher made it very clear to me that I am second best, not smart enough to make an A. When I did see me an A on my report card, it did not feel like a reflection of merit but like a challenge. I think I have spent much of my life trying to prove to him that he was not wrong.

Though my pre-service teachers are certain that they would never let their biases interfere with the way they treat their future students, they, like me, will be trapped by their interpretation of prior experiences and beliefs. Nieto (2013) stated that a socially just person is one who challenges and disrupts stereotypes and common misconceptions. I need for my future colleagues to be socially just people, and for this to be possible, they have to come to terms with the unpleasant reality that we all are biased.

The Bias Project

The Bias Project is a personal experience for university students[4] consisting of three parts. In Part I, students identify the Other; in Part II, they approach the Other; and in Part III, they become the Other. The experience concludes with a reflection that invites students to explore the presence of the Other in ourselves (Georgis & Kennedy, 2009).

Part I – Identifying the Other. The experience begins by confronting students with Crutcher's quote. Once they understand the meaning of the word "bigot," they usually react similar to how I did because most people think of themselves as open-minded. Students then understand that prejudice is part of what it means to be human and that the point is not self-

[4] Students have successfully completed the experience in introductory, upper level, and graduate education courses as well as in mixed majors freshmen seminars in both traditional and online settings.

depreciation, which amplifies pre-existing biases as everything from hereon after will come from a place of defense, but self-awareness. Students then think about what others prejudge people for. Though they are probably thinking about themselves, temporarily laying existing prejudice on others makes them feel safe, which is an essential prerequisite at this early stage of the experience. Together they effortlessly compose a complex web of prejudices while I create a visual of their responses as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Prejudice Web

Once student replies are exhausted, their focus is redirected back onto themselves, and they are asked to take a moment to themselves to make a mental list of those prejudices that apply to them. After a minute of silence, I ask that anyone who has come up with an empty list raise his/her hand. Over the years, I have taken this journey with hundreds of students; no one has ever indicated to be free of prejudice. To make the experience more tangible and to prepare the second part of the project, students are asked to think of a person in their lives who displays one of the characteristics that ended up on their mental lists. Most of them already have someone in mind. At this point, we have identified the Other for ourselves. Their reflections on

Part I show that they are willing to take a risk with this experience. For example, Jazmin from a freshmen seminar wrote:

> I made a list of characteristics that I am biased about. I was sad to see how many qualities I judge people on. I always thought I treated people equally, but I have come to realize that I do not.

Once this insight is acknowledged, students are ready for the next part.

Part II – Approaching the Other. The second part of the experience begins with the realization that they are asked to approach the Other. In preparation for this conversation, students first learn how to compose and conduct a qualitative interview. I use my bias against gun ownership as an example to design questions whose format is loosely based on Spradley's (1979) design for ethnographic interviews as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Designing Conversation Questions

Question Type	Example for a Conversation with a Gun Owner
1. Descriptive	Tell me how it came about that you became a gun owner.
2. Specific	Can you tell me about the day you got your first gun?
3. Structural	Can you tell me some typical situations in which you take your gun with you?
4. Contrast	Can you think of some things that make you feel hesitant about guns?

As any qualitative researcher knows, it is very difficult to compose good conversation questions. Students learn to avoid convoluted questions so as not to overwhelm their conversation partner, as well as yes/no questions, which will give them no insights to reflect on.

Composing this conversation enables students to change the way they think about the encounter. They often start with the idea of confronting the person they thought of in Part I rather than approaching the Other. This is reflected in bellicosely worded questions such as "Why do you disrespect gay people?" or "Why are you against Muslims?" By rewording the questions, students slowly understand that antagonizing the Other closes the small window of opportunity to see the world from his/her perspective. With this understanding, they change the vernacular to that of their conversation partner to put the Other at ease. For example, "Why are you against abortion?" changes to "Can you tell me when you first felt that you are a pro-choice advocate?" In the process, their thinking about the encounter changes from confrontational to open or curious.

This is the point when students must distinguish among pluralist, essentialist, and critical multiculturalism (Morris, 2016). They make the connection that exaggerated curiosity furthers the notion of pluralist multiculturalism because it exoticizes the Other. With this understanding, they can prepare not to employ a museum's approach during the conversation where they focus solely on the Otherness of the Other. The purpose of the Bias Project as a whole is illuminated when students understand the idea of critical multiculturalism, which aims at improving human relationships by opening people toward plurality (Morris, 2016).

Once all interview questions are revised and students have designed a plan to meet with their conversation partners, they are anxious to proceed. In their final reflections, many students described this part of the experience as "nerve-wrecking" while others were looking forward to finally having a conversation with a person who they feel does wrong. For example, Madison chose to have a conversation with her mother who is a hoarder. Her final reflection below will show what kind of changes the encounter can make possible. Some students approached the

Other with a mindset like Clayton who wrote: "This assignment honestly began with me wanting to prove to Dr. Varbelow that guns are not as bad as prescribed." I will call on Clayton again at the end of this part after he had a chance to become the Other.

Part III – Becoming the Other. After their encounter with the Other, students compose a first-person narrative from the point of view of their conversation partner. Once they understand that this is not a simple write up of the conversation from the other person's point of view, this proves to be the most difficult part of the experience. For example, Charles observed, "This was not easy to write. Several times I found myself making a sentence sound sarcastic and I had to step back and start over." But once they accept the challenge, their work is chillingly insightful. Below is an excerpt from Madison's narrative written from her mother's point of view:

> *I walk inside my home and all I feel is overwhelmed and anxious. How did I let this happen? Why can't I make all of this go away? I want more than anything in this world to be able to live a simple life style. Free from unnecessary items and things that don't bring happiness into my life. I've tried multiple times to fix this mess that is consuming my house. I clean one room but then I build a bigger mess in another room. I feel as if this cycle never ends. … I feel guilty that I would let this become so bad. I feel guilty every time I go shopping because I buy more to cover up the ugly around my home. I want to invite people over for fellowship, but I can't. Daily things, like cooking meals, would be less daunting if I didn't have to de-clutter before starting the next meal. I dread having to go inside my bedroom because I always have to uncover one mess before I get where I need.*

Madison's final reflection exemplifies that the experience was what Huebner described as the fourth social encounter:

> I now understand why my mom struggles like she does. I always assumed she liked it like that. I now can see the guilt she feels about this. … This assignment has reestablished my mom's and my relationship. … I am now devoting a lot of my time this summer to help her organize and go through her home. … My mom sends me pictures throughout the day of little sections of the house she has cleaned and organized. She is a lot happier now.

The change in perspective described by Madison embodies Huebner's definition of conversation. It changed Madison once she appreciated her mother's agony, it changed her mother who was acknowledged through the conversation, and the empathy created in the course changed their relationship with each other.

Similarly, Jovanna decided to talk with her aunt who is a white supremacist. Since Jovanna distances herself from those beliefs, she had not spoken to any family members in years. The following is an excerpt from her narrative written from her aunt's point of view:

> *Mamma always said never to play with the kids down the road. But you see, my siblings and I were the only kids in a time mile radius besides the family down the road. I knew better not to associate with anyone whose skin is darker than my own, but I wanted friends. So, I skipped down the road to play with the González's children. Boy, did we have a blast … When I arrived at my house, Mamma was waiting for me on the porch with the bible and a belt. I received 20 likins that night along with a lecture saying that peoples whose skin is darker than ours are evil people. They are the devil's children. … When daddy came home that night, I got 10 more likins and he told me good girls don't*

> *lie to their parents and only good girls get into heaven. … Damn, I should have listened to Mamma and Daddy. I should have been a good little girl. Why can't I be a good little girl? Why?*

The way Jovanna tells her aunt's story shows how the encounter let her separate her aunt from the group categories Jovanna had used to think about white supremacists and her family. Her final thoughts reflect her understanding that a person is not exclusively the ideals one disagrees with:

> The day after my meeting, I received a phone call from my aunt [who] explained to me, that my interview with her opened her eyes. … I felt like she was holding on to some heavy stuff and it needed to be let out; I just so happen to be that person. I feel like deep down, my aunt isn't a racist person. She was somewhat brainwashed into believing things that aren't even true.

Through conversation, Jovanna realized that the one is not the group. The group's identity is reflected in its ideals, which rise above those of the individual, drowning out his/her singular stories. Hence, it is futile to attempt to empathize with the Other as a collective. But by approaching the Other as one, his/her individual story can make the changes conversation promises possible.

While students' beliefs did not change, which was also not the purpose of the Bias Project, they no longer felt walled off from the Other. Oscar stated, "I have respect for these people that I never had." This change is made possible when they encounter the Other as a fellow human being rather than as an opponent. As they listen to the Other's story, they recognize themselves in a sentence, in a feeling, or in an experience. Christa wrote, "After the interview, as I read over our conversation and tried to view it from her perspective, I started

thinking about my own experiences," and Jacob concluded, "After talking with Mike, I realized his situation was similar to my own (just in reverse)." What conversation makes possible is that for a brief moment we glimpse ourselves in the Other.

Although the experience of the conversation is generally more influential for the one who initiates it, the Other feels acknowledged by being given a voice. For example, Cheyenne, who is determined never to have children[5], noted:

> When I asked to do our interview, [my conversation partner] got very, very excited about it because any chance she gets to talk about children she will jump at. It took me a little bit to open up and hear her out because to me children are just awful.

While the person initiating the conversation is often not directly acknowledged, the Other is. Many students felt that people initially agree to participate because it gives them a chance to convince an opponent. But through the course of the conversation, they observe a zealot changing into someone who simply has strong beliefs on a topic, just like they do. They realize emotionally what they have already known intellectually, namely that we all have reasons to act the way we do. This human connection opens them to acknowledging the Other in themselves.

For the vast majority of students, the Bias Project presented a uniquely challenging and positive experience. Most students drew conclusions similar to Jazmin, whom I quoted earlier. In her final reflection, she stated,

> By me setting aside my feelings and allowing [my brother] to be himself, I have been allowed to see his true heart again. … I have chosen to take this effect into all of my relationships. I want people to know I will love them regardless of my personal biases.

[5] Cheyenne is not an education but a business major who participated in the Bias Project when I was invited to conduct a guest seminar in an organizational behavior course.

> … Even if I can judge one less time a day until it becomes a habit, I will feel accomplished.

While Jazmin's description of the experience is a testament to how powerful it is, it does not evidence transformation. Huebner (1963) stated that to learn means to change and that this change is reflected in the quality of human relationships. Since the Bias Project causes insights into the self and into what it means to be human, it has the potential to lay the foundation for transformation. I will conclude this part by calling on Clayton, who you recall went into this project to prove his point to me. He chose to have a conversation with a history professor who, like me, is opposed to gun ownership. Below are Clayton's final reflections:

> This assignment honestly began with me wanting to prove to Dr. Varbelow that guns are not as bad as prescribed. I still may believe this, but that is my reality, not hers. I did not take the time to realize that what may seem like common sense to me may seem like pure insanity to others. The point of the assignment is to realize that I must be able to understand another person's reality. The point of the assignment is more realistically the point of life, and that is empathy and appreciation, is this not what makes us human? If we as a human race continually shrug off the feelings, ideas, hardships, and biases of other people then what have we become? We must become more open to the idea that there are other ideas.

Clayton's final thoughts are indicative of two insights gained by all of us who participated in this experience: we are not infallible in our views of others and a person does not have to share our worldviews to teach us something.

Throughout the Bias Project, participants undergo three changes. The first one is their acknowledgment of the fact that they are bigots, the second is that they change their approach of

the Other from confrontational to open. This makes possible the final one, which is to sense themselves in the Other and the Other in themselves. It is my hope that the experience of these three changes carries the seed for transformation.

Conclusion

So what are the promises, the perils, and the provocations of diversity in the 21st century? As outlined in the first part of this chapter, the promises of diversity lie in its innate gift to offer us an opening out of the metaphorical boxes that present our singular realities. Truths do not exist in me or in the Other but in the fertile space between our two epistemologies. The Other does not validate or devalue me, but his existence provides a beacon for me that allows me to locate my self and the place I occupy in the space and time we share. In short, without an Other, I cannot be me as he needs my presence to be him.

The second part of this chapter shows that the perils of diversity exist in the silence created in institutions of education whose purpose must be to help create just societies. The elimination of conflict permits the deterioration of democracy while comfort zones represent blinders that keep us from envisioning what should be and what we could be. Without vision, evolution turns into drifting.

And finally, the provocation diversity presents is the terrifying notion that the story of the Other is also my story. Hence, we must think of self/Other not in dichotomous but in dialectical terms. While the former makes both mutually exclusive, the latter has the potential to provoke us into exploring the possibilities that a meeting of different epistemologies bears. Then we have a chance to relate to each other as fellow human beings instead of as members from warring

ideological or social tribes. And it is how we relate to the Other that reflects the measure of our humanness.

References

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2),* 211-236. doi:10.3386/w23089

Aoki, T. (1981). Toward understanding curriculum talk through reciprocity of perspectives. In W. Pinar & R. Irwin (Eds.) (2005), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted Aoki* (pp. 219-228). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Aoki, T. (1993). Legitimating live curriculum: Toward a curricular landscape of multiplicity. In W. Pinar & R. Irwin (Eds.), (2005), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted Aoki* (pp. 321-329). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Bruni, F. (2014, September 7). Demanding more from colleges. *The New York Times.* Retrieved October 13, 2017, from http://nyti.ms/1qE5oWD

Carlson, D. (2002). *Leaving safe harbors: Toward a new progressivism in American education and public life.* New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). Research on Teaching and Teacher Education and Its Influences on Policy and Practice.*Educational Researcher,45*(2), 83-91. doi:10.3102/0013189x16639597

Deresiewicz, W. (2014). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life.* New York, NY : Free Press.

Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group.

Georgis, D., & Kennedy, R. M. (2009). Touched by Injury: Toward an Educational Theory of Anti-Racist Humanism. *Ethics and Education, 4(1)*, 19-30.

Gibson, C. (2015). *Beyond reason: Morality, polarization, and the communication of climate change* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Oregon. Retrieved October 14, 2017, from http://hdl.handle.net/1794/19060

Ginges, J., Atran, S., Medin, D., & Shikaki, K. (2007). Sacred bounds on rational resolution of violent political conflict. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 104(18),* 7357-7360. doi:10.1073/pnas.0701768104

Haidt, J. (2016). Why concepts creep to the left. *Psychological Inquiry, 27(1)*, 40-45. doi:10.1080/1047840x.2016.1115713

Huebner, D. (1962). The art of teaching. In V. Hillis (Ed.) (1999), *The lure of the transcendent: Collected essays by Dwayne E. Huebner* (pp. 23-35). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Huebner, D. (1963). New modes of man's relationship to man. In V. Hillis (Ed.), (1999), *The lure of the transcendent: Collected essays by Dwayne E. Huebner* (pp. 74-93). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Huebner, D. (1993). Education and spirituality. In V. Hillis (Ed.), (1999), *The lure of the transcendent: Collected essays by Dwayne E. Huebner* (pp. 401-416). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Jacobs, A. (2017). *How to think: a survival guide for a world at odds.* New York, NY: Convergent Books.

Kierkegaard, S. (1954). *Fear and trembling, and the sickness unto death*. (W. Lowrie, Trans.). Garden City, NY: Doubleday. (Original work published 1941)

Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Critical pedagogy*. (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Kunda, Z. (1990). The Case for Motivated Reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin, 108(3)*, 480-498.

Lukianoff, G. (2017). How Colleges Create the "Expectation of Confirmation". *Templeton Press.* Retrieved from http://www.soamcontest.com/content/how-colleges-create-expectation-confirmation

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2017). The Coddling of the American Mind. *The Atlantic.* Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/

Morris, M. (2016). *Curriculum studies guidebooks: Concepts and theoretical frameworks*. New York: Peter Lang.

Nieto, S. (2013). *Finding joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds: culturally responsive and socially just practices in U.S. classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Nietzsche, F.W. (1978). *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A book for all and none.* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1883)

Popper, K. R. (1972). *Objective knowledge.* Clarendon Press:Oxford.

Rozental, S. (1967). *Niels Bohr: His life and work.* Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co.

Spradley, J. (1979). *The Ethnographic Interview.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Stafford, T. (2017). How to get people to overcome their bias. *The BBC News*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170131-why-wont-some-people-listen-to-reason